An Action Plan for a Fire Barn and Community Hall for Panama

Presented by

Students of CRPL 810 Qualitative Techniques
Community and Regional Planning
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The village of Panama is located in the southeast portion of Lancaster County in the state of Nebraska, west of Nebraska Hwy 43 and north of Panama Road. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Aerial Photograph of Panama, NE.
It is a community of 250 people according to the US Census 2000. 95% of the village population worked outside the village and commuted to either Lincoln, Bennet or Firth among other places. 13% of the population is over the age of 65. Panama contains a Post Office (See Figure 2), a meat locker facility (See Figure 3), a local bank branch (See Figure 4) and an automobile repair shop (See Figure 5). The local café (See Figure 6) is currently undergoing renovation and is open to the public on a restricted basis.

Figure 2: Panama Post Office  
Figure 3: Meat Locker Facility

Figure 4: Panama Branch Bank  
Figure 5: Automobile repair facility
Nearly sixteen years ago a donation of ten thousand dollars was made to the village of Panama with the intent that it be used for a future community center. This gift had been maintained in an account until recent community interest for a community center was rekindled by a small group of local residents headed by Bill Bryant and Eric Johnson. Yelena Mitrofanova, a Lancaster County extension educator at that time, University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension, was contacted by Bryant and Johnson in Summer 2006, with a request for technical assistance to assist the community in their efforts to build a community center. Mitrofanova, in turn, contacted Professor N. Brito Mutunayagam, Professor, Community and Regional Planning and Extension Specialist, University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension, and arranged a meeting at Lincoln with Bryant and Johnson in July 2006, which was also attended by two other Extension Educators, Dennis Kahl and Phyllis Schoenholz. Prof. Mutunayagam contemplated this request for technical assistance as a valuable learning opportunity for students of CRPL 810 Qualitative Techniques, in the Community and Regional Planning program at the University of Nebraska Lincoln in the Fall Semester 2006. In order to validate such a learning

Figure 6: Panama Cafe
opportunity, Mutunayagam accompanied by four students from the CRPL 810 class, together with Phyllis Schoenholz attended a community stakeholder meeting in Panama, on August 31st, 2006, at which the community center idea was presented to them by Bryant.

During the meeting, the stakeholders adopted a resolution to set up a community foundation, whose primary role would be fund raising and oversight for the proposed community center, using the donated money as seed capital. A formal request was made to Professor Mutunayagam by Bryant at the meeting to assist the stakeholders in their efforts to build the community center. The request was accepted and the project was undertaken and assigned as the term project for the CRPL 810 Class to be completed by the end of the Fall Semester 2006.

Figure 7: Mutunayagam meets stake holders at Panama Café on August 31st, 2006
Organization of Research

Professor Mutunayagam started the semester by introducing his students to a variety of qualitative techniques used by planners. The students, in turn, dedicated their initial efforts to apply the principles and techniques that they learned from these lectures to design a detailed set of research questions to assist them in their efforts to conduct an assessment of community needs for a community center in the village. Research of secondary information relating to Panama, NE, together with the design, formulation and administration of a questionnaire to validate a basic research hypothesis became the elements of “needs assessment” – considered as the first logical step in the planning process.

Research Hypothesis

In order to formulate the research hypothesis, students debated whether the creation of a community center was a prerequisite for building and maintaining a “sense of community”, or whether a “sense of community” was needed to exist as the prerequisite for a community center initiative to be launched successfully.
The students concluded their discussions by formulating the following research hypothesis:

“Panama possesses the “sense of community” required to successfully launch a community center building initiative in the village”.

The students then ventured to formulate a series of research questions intended to validate or nullify this hypothesis.

**The Systems Approach**

The students, who had already been introduced to the “Systems Approach” as one of the most effective qualitative methods used by planners to study complex community phenomena, adopted the approach to organize themselves into 5 study groups (3 students per group). Each group adopted one of the following subsystems for study:

1. The Physical /Spatial Subsystem
2. The Demographic/Social Subsystem
3. The Economic/Financial subsystem
4. The Behavioral/Values subsystem
5. The Decision making and Technology subsystem.

A steering group of 3 students was set up to coordinate the whole system. Each subsystem group was assigned the responsibility to formulate questionnaires to validate or nullify the aforementioned hypothesis in the context of their adopted subsystem perspective.

1. The Scope of the Spatial /Physical Subsystem

The first area of research focused on spatial aspects of a community center. Research questions relating to various physical and spatial attributes of any alternative location for the community center within the village were formulated with the intent of determining community preferences for a desired location for the proposed center.

2. The Demographic/Social Subsystem

The human resources representing the village were visualized as the primary assets and social capital of the community. Research questions were formulated to determine how these primary assets and social capital would be applied to successfully create the community center.

3. The Economic/Financial Subsystem

The financial capital and the village economy were visualized as two of the crucial determinants for the success or failure of the community center initiative in Panama. Research questions were formulated to determine how these two determining factors could affect the financial
feasibility and the economic viability of the village to build and maintain a community center in Panama.

4. The Behavioral/Values Subsystem

Values, attitudes and other behavioral attributes of village residents play a vital role in influencing community support and decision making in the village of Panama relating to the community center initiative. Research questions were formulated to determine how the values, attitudes, preferences and biases of village residents would influence the decision to implement the community center initiative in the village.

5. The Decision making and Communication Subsystem

Communication, interaction of the community residents with local decision makers, and trust are three vital elements needed for decision making to transform any vision for a community center into reality. Research questions were formulated to determine how the prevailing partnership and trust between decision makers and village residents would reinforce or impede decision making for the community center.

Research

Each group conducted research from secondary sources of information to secure a clearer perspective of the community. A site inspection and a photographic survey of the village by the course instructor provided the students with visual cues about various physical elements of the village. A copy of the Comprehensive Plan for Panama
and the accompanying Zoning Regulations was secured from Hannah Keelan Associates and studied in order to determine all sites which had the requisite land use and zoning attributes for consideration as suitable locations for the community center in accordance with the Comprehensive Plan for Panama. The commemorative publication that was issued during the centennial celebrations of the village was also reviewed to secure a historic and cultural perspective of the village community, to assess community strengths and weaknesses. The community profile generated by the Sonoran Institute EPS system provided the basis for understanding demographic character of Panama.

This background research provided the basis for the design of 5 questionnaires to be used to secure responses from Panama stakeholders and sense their level of commitment to the community center initiative. The formulation of an Action Plan to build the Community Center in Panama would be justified if a strong commitment the initiative was sensed.

**Research Findings**

1. **Findings from the Comprehensive Plan**

   It became very evident that there are a number of ways that the Comprehensive Plan supported the development and building of a community center for conducting activities for the youth, families, the elderly and visitors. It is stated in the plan that it is a goal of the
community to strive to improve the quality of life and sense of community for all residents of Panama.

The Comprehensive Plan also addressed the community need to upgrade athletic fields, playgrounds, and picnic areas in the foreseeable future. New playground equipment acquired and installed near the Community Center would provide the much desired opportunity for children to play in a community space.

There are approximately 124.3 acres of vacant land in Panama which equals an estimated 68 percent of the total platted Village area. However, it is indicated in the Comprehensive Plan that the community would like to preserve and improve the physical appearance and character of Panama with emphasis on the downtown area. In order to minimize costs associated with further development of the existing infrastructure, the community preferred concentrating any new building activity (such as the community center) close to downtown and along the Locust Street corridor to maximize the use of land presently served by existing municipal utility infrastructure.
Based on a review of the Current Panama Zoning shown in Figure 9 below, only one area in town is currently zoned for a community center.

**Figure 9: Current Panama Zoning**

The area is the site of the old Panama school. This area is currently occupied by the abandoned School building (See Figure 10). The old school was strategically located but its abandonment and consequent damage makes the prospect of rehabilitating the building into a very expensive and unaffordable proposition. Since the property is privately owned, it would also have to be acquired through eminent domain if it is to be put to public use. Additional land would also be required to be acquired for parking which is not available on the premises. Any reuse of the building would also require special remodeling in order to render the three storey building accessible to persons with physical challenges.

**Figure 10: Old School House**
There is an area east of downtown intended to be zoned multi-family residential that is not currently zoned accordingly in the Future Land Use Map. This area is bordered by South Railway Street to the north and Willow Street to the east. Currently homes are located in this area. See Figure 11 below.

Source: Hannah Keelan Associates, Lincoln, NE.

**Figure 11:** Future Land Use for Panama

This area is an alternative site for consideration based on the designated use. However, if the village chooses to build a community center in a zone where that use is not considered a permitted use, then a variance will be required.
2. Space Considerations

i. Floodplain and Natural Resources

The town is not situated on any flood plain or protected natural habitat.

ii. Topography

The gravity sewage system is the primary concern affected by the topography of the town. Locust Street is the main street running north and south in Panama and is also where the majority of businesses are located. Additional costs associated with pumping waste up to the primary system will be a concern if any development is proposed away from the main street.

iii. Building Space

When considering a site for the community center, its overall space requirements are important. Issues that affect the space requirements are consolidation with a fire barn, parks and recreation, parking, and future growth considerations. A combination fire barn and community center requires a larger lot as well as flexibility for expansion.

iv. Parking

Parking is important to consider along with a site. Generally, the best area in the village for parking is in and around the downtown area. During evening hours the majority of businesses are closed and parking becomes available. North of the abandoned railroad right of way is
dominated by residential areas and not very accessible for parking. The area around the baseball park is not designed for through traffic and would require the construction of new roads and parking if a community center were to be built.

The benefit of providing at least a few parking stalls is that handicap accessibility requirements can be met and regular operations and meetings can more easily accommodate vehicular traffic. During larger events such as weddings, parking will occur on streets and around the community center. Creative ways to reduce parking spillover into residential areas can be developed by the residents of Panama. For example the village residents can agree to walk during large events or provide instructions to guests about where to park and walk to the community center.

v. Parks and Recreation

Connectivity to the trail system is an issue that needs to be addressed at the time of site selection. The abandoned right of way occupied by the defunct railroad presents this opportunity to Panama and could add to the attractiveness to the community center. Trails provide a creative way to make Panama a more healthy and attractive place to live.
Playground with appropriate equipment for games and sports would be a welcome addition to enhance the outdoor spaces around the community center.

3. Population characteristics

Published secondary data from the US Census was researched to develop a better understanding of the socio-demographic profile of the village of Panama, NE. This profile is presented in the form of a summarized listing that is presented below:

i. Population and Gender division

Total Population – 253

Male Population – 122 (48%)

Female Population – 131 (52%)

ii. Age characteristics

Population under 20 years of age – 78 (31%)

Population over 65 years of age – 32 (12.6%)

Median Age – 36.8

iii. Ethnicity and Race

White – 98.8%

Black – 0.8%

Asian – 0.4%

Hispanic – 0.8%
iv. Housing and household characteristics

- Family households – 77 (79.4%)
- Average household size – 2.6
- Average family size – 3.0
- Occupied housing units – 97 (96%)
- Owner-occupied housing units – 77 (79.4%)
- Renter-occupied housing units – 20 (20.6%)
- Median home value - $87,700
- Median Gross Rent - $525

v. Educational attainment

- High school level educated – 73 (43.2%)
- Some college, no degree – 56 (33.3%)
- Associate’s degree – 12 (7.1%)
- Bachelor’s degree – 19 (11.3%)
- Grad or Professional degree – 8 (4.8%)
- Percentage of high school grad or higher – 89.9%

vi. Employment and Employment location

- In labor force – 155 (74.2%)
- Work outside of Panama – 132
- Residents who work full time – 75%
- Residents who work at home – 4.5%
- Residents who travel in excess of 20 minutes to get to work – 116
vii. Income

Median Household income - $47,841
Median Family income - $50,625
Per Capita Income - $17,597

viii. Poverty Status

Families under poverty level – 0%
Individuals under poverty level– 1.4%

4. First Community interest in a community center

In 1988, a generous amount of money ($10,000) was donated by a community stakeholder to be used for a future community center. Between 1988 and 2005, no progress was made and the money lay dormant and unused. Interest in his community center was revived in 2005 when the community was reminded that most communities in Lancaster County already had functioning community centers and Panama had the potential to initiate one. The availability of seed capital for such an initiative provided additional motivation for reviving this initiative.

5. Findings from Community Surveys

In November of 2002, a community-wide survey was completed by residents of the village. The survey indicated that parks and recreation areas need some improvement and that a community or recreation center would be most beneficial to Panama.
On October 18th, 2005, another survey was conducted involving 82 qualifying households in Panama and environs, to determine the interest of the community in a community center. 55 households responded to this survey, representing 67% rate of response. A 100% positive response to the proposal for a community center indicated that many stakeholders were quite interested in such an initiative. However, the survey revealed a certain amount of skepticism whether such an initiative was likely to get accomplished. Another issue that was raised was a proposal to build a joint community center/fire barn. 18 respondents favored a joint facility while 26 were in opposition. Those who favored a joint facility supported separate facilities if grant funding was not obtained for the joint facility. The remaining respondents did not submit any opinion in this respect. 23 respondents favored the current site for the fire barn and 6 disfavored the current site. There appeared to be considerable ambivalence in the responses and it was learned that the opinions for the preferred site could differ depending on whether it was decided to have separate facilities for the community center and the fire barn or joint facilities.

The survey indicated that the primary purpose of the community center would be for family gatherings, community events, and meeting spaces for youth and adult organizations. Interest in having a library, an exercise room, a recreational area, a meeting room (for village board meetings) and an adjacent play area were also presented as
requirements for the community center. Computer facilities for public use, staging for concerts, plays, pageants and speakers, and space for quilting were among the other needs expressed by some respondents.

6. Funding

i. Seed fund

During their centennial celebration a donation was contributed to the village for the purpose of building a community center. The village currently has about $10,000 seed money minus the funds used to establish a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization to partner with the Lincoln Foundation. The availability of seed capital to initiate the community center project, together with the availability of a cornerstone which was purchased to celebrate the village centennial are viewed as two key incentives that could make this initiative successful.

ii. Partnership Opportunities and Grant Opportunities

The community survey conducted in October 2005 indicates that residents are concerned by the lack of funding for projects.

The intent of creating the partnership with the Lincoln Foundation was to leverage grant funding while paying out a significantly low fee for such services. Other benefits of the partnership included assistance from the Lincoln Foundation through grant writing training and receipt of information about potential opportunities for grants on a continuing basis.
Another beneficial partnership would be with the Firth Fire District and FEMA. The new Fire Barn initiative by the First Fire District envisions an emergency shelter as part of the facility that could be put to good use as a meeting place for community activities when not in use in its shelter role. This option has the potential of subsidizing the cost to the community for a community center. Other advantages include reducing costs by sharing restrooms, showers and a kitchen area.

iii. Loans

The local bank could be instrumental in loaning The Village money to build the community center. The USDA Community facilities program is another avenue for acquiring loans and might be willing to support Panama through a guaranteed loan program. Loans would need to be repaid in the future and funds for payment would need to be part of the plan. Possible avenues for repayment include raising property taxes, using funds from the sale of public assets or from the endowments created by investing the funds generated through the sale of public assets.

iv. Property/Sales Tax

A reassessment of property values could be useful in implementing a property tax increase to assist in the building of the community center and/or to help repay any loans.

Sales tax is not an option at this time because Panama’s retail business sector is in decline.
v. Absence of Businesses in Panama

The community survey conducted in October 2005 indicates that residents are concerned by the declining number of local businesses. All citizens appeared to agree that the community would benefit from more commerce. The community is motivated to attract new businesses and the comprehensive plan mentions implementing community redevelopment authority in order to persuade businesses to locate in Panama. One benefit of more commerce would be to create a tax base Panama could use to generate funds for public use. The community center could be an incentive to attract businesses to the area.

vi. Property Sales/Interest from endowment of funds

Panama currently has over 120 acres of vacant land available in the community according to the Comprehensive Plan. Some of this land is already in the public domain and could be sold to generate funds. The funds could either be spent directly on capital costs or could be invested and the interest from the endowment used to repay the loan or for operation costs. The sale of other publicly owned assets that are not profitable should also be investigated.

vii. Private Donations/ Fundraising

Opportunities for seeking and obtaining private donations from citizens and private businesses should be explored in Panama. One form of donations would be in cash. Another form would be in kind
contributions. For instance, the owner of the Panama Café made the first move by volunteering the use of the Café and its space to hold public meetings to raise funds and for other fund raising events.

viii. Rental Fees for Activities and Events

An assured source of continuing revenue would be the rental fees for the use of the community center for such activities and events as wedding receptions, trade shows, exhibits and other private events. Rental income would be a major source for paying operating costs.

ix. Cost for reuse of existing buildings

Not many buildings were available in the village of Panama. The old school was strategically located but its abandonment and consequent damage that it has suffered makes the prospect of rehabilitating the building into a very expensive and unaffordable proposition. Since the property is privately owned, it would also have to be acquired through eminent domain if it is to be put to public use. Additional land would also be required to be acquired for parking which is not available on the premises. Any reuse of the building would also require special remodeling in order to render the three storey building accessible to persons with physical challenges.

7. Sense of Community

Community can be defined as a place where social interaction takes place within a geographic area among citizens who have one or
more additional common ties (Kaufman 1959, p. 14). Panama is a bedroom community where most of the adults work outside of Panama and all school going children attend school in a neighboring town. Bedroom communities such as Panama's often find their close proximity to a major urban center as a counterproductive factor against local leadership's efforts to build a stronger community (Kaufman, 1959). This presents a challenge to community growth and involvement as actions that would take place at the local level happen elsewhere (Kaufman, 1959, p. 14). Perhaps a community center would provide a spot for resident interaction and community cohesion at times when the residents are not working or studying outside the village boundaries.

The Comprehensive Plan specifically stated that gathering support for and building a community center is one of the key action strategies for preserving and strengthening the community.

The results of the community survey conducted in October 2005 suggested community support for a community center in Panama. It is strongly believed that community cohesion, support for local organizations, and sense of community unity are critical elements that need to be created, nurtured and strengthened. A community center could pave the way for nurturing and strengthening the “sense of community” in Panama.
8. Decision Making in Panama

Panama has a Village Board which functions as the primary decision making body. The village is also served by a Planning Commission. The Planning Commission studies proposals submitted by the Village Board for review and submits recommendations for decision making by the Village Board. The Planning Commission is responsible for influencing decisions made by the Village Board relating to land development and planning and in the administration of zoning regulations.

References

Community Survey. Performed October 18, 2005.
